



RANTS & RAVES

He's not being paranoid: the machines really *are* out to get Mel Croucher. And when they get hold of him, they'll find that his brain has been miraculously wiped clean of data

AUTO DA FÉ



MEL CROUCHER RANTS

The automatic doors at my local shopping mall are normally very polite. When I approach them, they cringe backwards like hyenas making way for a lion. But last Tuesday, and I assure you I was sober, the automatic doors waited until I was in range and then deliberately punched me in the face.

I had to retire hurt to the nearest computerised toilet, where 50 pence buys you a few minutes

of privacy and hygienic solace, but no sooner had I sat on the pan than the vacuum flush thingy tried to disembowel me by sucking my lower intestine through my backside. It was soon after I got back home, when the microwave used its invisible metal-eating rays to explode a silver-rimmed plate, that I realised The Machines are trying to kill me.

WELCOME TO THE FUTURE

We've been living in a parallel universe for several generations now, which is why we are not at all surprised to find ourselves here in

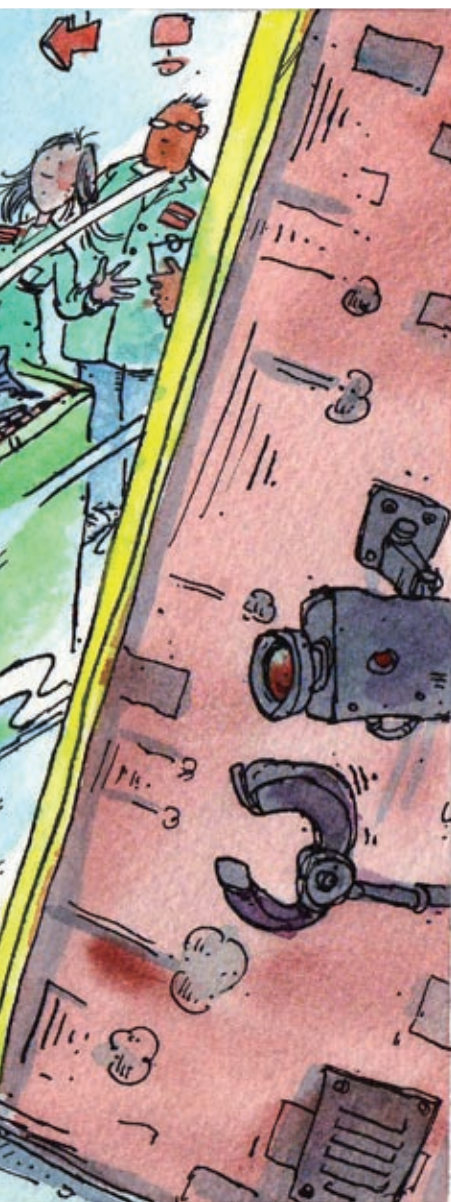
the future as well as there in the present, both at the same time. Do you remember how the mobile phone was such an instant success when it hit the market? That's because everyone already knew exactly what mobiles were for and how to use them, thanks to years of exposure to the crew of the Starship Enterprise. In fact, most people expected mobiles to be worn on the wrist, as Dick Tracy had been doing since 1931.

But much scarier is the fact that we have all been expecting machines to organise themselves and declare war on humanity since

the Cybermen opened hostilities in 1966 and the Terminator gave us the coup de grâce in 1984. Last Tuesday, when The Machines attacked me, I simply wondered what had taken them so long.

People have been getting slashed, mashed, fried, sliced and diced by machines ever since 5th September 1830, when William Huskisson MP was killed by the inaugural train from Liverpool to London. The train was acquitted of murder because Huskisson obviously provoked it by being a Tory. Even the mechanised slaughter of millions in the First World War could not be blamed on the machines, but on the paymasters of the industrial military complex who sanctioned their usage.

The first murder of a human by a machine probably happened in 1981, when a Kawasaki assembly robot went mad and deliberately shoved a hapless repairman into a grinder, but even that homicide was not pre-programmed. Deliberately programming



machines to seek out human beings and kill them would only happen in the future. But here I am living in the future, and sentient machines are now being created with the sole intention of committing murder.

RISE OF THE ROBOTS

You are probably expecting me to trot out the Three Laws of Robotics. I won't disappoint you. These simple ethical rules were set out in a short story by Isaac Asimov, first published in 1942, and I had always hoped they would hold good for my lifetime:

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey orders given to it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

But these laws have not held good for my lifetime. The first armed battlefield robots have already been deployed, by an American administration desperate to stave off further defeat and humiliation. Over four thousand robots are serving in Iraq as you read this, with more legions on duty in Afghanistan. They don't yet look like Arnold Schwarzenegger and go around hunting pregnant women, but I reckon there's a shed-load of boffins in a sealed bunker somewhere who are working on it. Meanwhile, another lot of boffins are cheerfully turning out Smart Bombs that can't tell a wedding party from an arms dump, and if it wasn't for our own soldiers leaking tales of 'friendly fire' on their *Star Trek* flip-top mobile phones, they would deny responsibility for that, too.

CRUISE CONTROL

Cruise missiles have been making their own targeting decisions for over 20 years, based on systems less sophisticated than Google Maps. They may cost millions, but they still get confused by the simplest of enemy strategies. Like snowfall. Computer-controlled mechanical guards, fully armed with instructions to kill, are on duty along the borders of South Korea and Israel. It can't be long before some bright spark at the Home Office proposes killer robots on patrol outside the pubs and clubs of our inner cities. The Home Office is already considering the deployment of automatic 'electric bullet' wireless projectiles that can deliver a 50,000-volt charge over a 30-metre range. The USA and UK are developing military robots like there's no tomorrow, a phrase that is chillingly appropriate. But it looks as if the biggest player is going to be China, with an eye to raising even more billions of yuan by exporting computerised death to whoever wants to buy.

The Geneva conventions do not apply to autonomous robots, because machines cannot be held responsible for their own actions. So who is to be brought to trial for war crimes when the first automated massacre of human beings happens? It won't be the designers or the manufacturers or the arms sellers, who are never held culpable when their guns or rockets kill people. And it won't be software designers or programmers or politicians or generals or field commanders, none of whom issued the direct command to seek and destroy specific human targets. The Rise of the Machines has begun, and there is not a shred of humanity that can stop it.

THE LIGHT FANTASTIC



MEL CROUCHER
RAVES

Every quarter, my gas bill arrives and tells me the number of metered units I have used. It also gives me an equation to convert them into therms, advises me how many are peak rate, mid rate or low rate, and sets out the differential VAT rate depending on wind direction or the menstrual cycle of household pets. But all I really need to know is how much the buggers have increased their charges since last time.

My memory was getting full of unnecessary detailed information. I don't mean my computer's memory; I mean the spongy, slimy, electrically charged organ in my head that I use for data storage. My cerebrum was constantly bombarded by too much detail, and I was seduced into believing it was somehow relevant to me.

When I logged on to Skype, I would be informed that there were 8,979,362 other people online. Was that more or fewer than the day before? I couldn't remember. When an irregular royalty pittance arrived from the USA or the Eurozone, the exchange rate was set out to four decimal places, but I had no idea if sterling had gone up or down since last time. And so it was that I came to realise that the more detailed the information I was presented with, the less useful it was to me. The greater the accuracy, the more my little grey cells got cluttered up. My brain had become stuffed with temporary files, duplicate records, unwanted downloads and spam. I needed defragmenting. I needed an Ambient Orb.

GLOWING REVIEW

The Ambient Orb is a little glass ball that glows in the dark and costs about £75 plus shipping. Now I know you can buy a glass ball that glows in the dark for less than that: it's called a light bulb. But the little glass ball I'm talking about is the most sophisticated yet simple computer in the world, developed by the MIT Media Lab and manufactured by Ambient of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The Ambient server aggregates data from dozens of online sources. It scrubs, packages, transmits and decodes that complex information into something as simple as a WiFi-connected glowing ball of coloured light. The technology no longer feels like technology, it doesn't require a computer or technical infrastructure to operate, and it certainly doesn't need any

wires, peripherals or an instruction manual. If you can understand a clock, you'll find using the Orb much simpler. It doesn't even use numbers. Oh yeah, I nearly forgot the best bit. The Ambient Orb predicts the future.

The Orb arrives pre-programmed to predict the stock market in general, and monitor any shares you might own in particular. If shares are on the way up, it glows green. If the market is on the way down, it glows red. And if nothing much is happening, it glows amber. The more intense the colour, the more volatile the market. No detail, no unnecessary clutter – just the entire trend encapsulated in light.

The wireless link allows it to monitor any other predictive trends you like, including the chances of snow, sunburn, hurricane, pollen, smog and swarms of locusts. It can summarise the value of your pension fund in a single glance, or the popularity of your political party in the blink of an eye. It can tell you the probability of a traffic jam on your favourite road, the likelihood of fish biting in your favourite river and the chances of catching the crabs at your favourite hotel. The best prediction is probably the simplest, and that is for temperature. I never could get to grips with decimal weather, and the Orb takes me back to simpler times. It glows the colour of a baboon's bum if it's going to be hot, through to snow white if it's going to be freezing. What's more, the light pulses if you need to take an umbrella. Marvellous.

EMPTY HEADED

The Ambient Orb will enable you all to join me in de-cluttering your brains as soon as the manufacturers make it officially available in the UK. I am looking forward to this momentous event. BT Research Labs did come up with its own version in December 2004, when spokesman Adam Oliver said: "The device opens up information technology to older people or the disabled, because users do not need keyboard skills or the ability to use complicated software to get information."

I'm afraid BT has missed an enormous opportunity here if it thinks the Ambient Orb is only for quadriplegic geriatrics. It is for every one of us who chooses to be liberated from the misery of accurate data. Say goodbye to precision. Turn your back on detail. Join with me and embrace hunch-technology. Let us amble towards the glow of Ambience and bathe in the ever-changing meaningless radiance of illumination.

Hallelujah! I see the light! ☺